Web-based Integrated Planning and Consultation System

The Web-base Integrated Planning and Consultation System (WIPCS) will be a tool for action agencies and their applicants to use during the initial phases of project development and assessment. The system will allow for more effective integration of listed resource conservation needs and the eventual streamlining of section 7(a)(2) consultation. The first phase of this system will allow project proponents to obtain species lists, species ecological information, bibliographic references, recommended conservation measures for incorporation into project designs, and Service contact information via the internet. It will also notify Service offices of upcoming project activities allowing for better workload planning.

When the first phase of WIPCS is compete, project proponents will be able to log onto the system, identify the location of their proposed project, provide a short project description, and instantly receive a list of listed resources that may be present in the vicinity of the project (*i.e.,* a species-list). This list will contain links to species accounts that will inform the user on important aspects of the species' life history, threats, and conservation needs and will allow project proponents to begin the process of evaluating the potential for their proposed actions to affect listed resources. The system will also contain links to bibliographies of resource information that will provide project proponents with guidance on where they may obtain additional information regarding listed resources. The system will inform project proponents of any special needs such as the timing of species surveys so they may plan their activities as early as possible. It will also provide project proponents with a series of "best management practices" that can be incorporated into project designs to eliminate, minimize, or mitigate for potential effects whenever practicable. These BMPs will be founded on "conservation strategies" for the various listed resources that they are designed to address. Conservation strategies are practical documents that focus not only on the conservation goals that need to be achieved to conserve listed resources, but also on realistic processes that can be used to achieve them.

There are three basic areas that will be addressed by BMPs. First is **avoidance**. At times there may be simple measures that can be incorporated to avoid exposure of listed resources to the potential effects of a proposed activity. For example, if a proposed activity will have short-term impacts, it may be possible to conduct the activity outside of the time period in which the species will be present. Note that the ability to accomplish this will vary by species, ecological circumstances, and project needs.

The second category of BMPs is **minimization**. Many times it will not be possible to avoid the potential effects of a proposed project. However, there may be measures that can be incorporated into the project design that will minimize the resulting effects. For example, it may be possible to erect siltation fences that will minimize, though not eliminate, the addition of silt to nearby streams.

The third category of BMPs is **mitigation**. Once it is determined that effects to a species will not be avoided and have been minimized to the extent that is determined to be reasonable, the remaining effects should be mitigated to ensure that the conservation status of the species will not be degraded. For example, if it is not possible to implement a proposed activity without destroying a certain amount of habitat, a project proponent may propose to restore

other areas that do not currently contain habitat in order to offset the remaining effects of their activity.

Note that ecological conditions often vary greatly across the landscape. A proposed project in one area may not have the same effects if proposed in a different area. Therefore, we anticipate that not only may there be different BMPs for different species, but there may also be different BMPs for the same species in different areas. Combine this with the need to ensure that BMPs for different species within the same area are compatible (*e.g.,* when BMPs for multiple species are applied to the same project the results don't become so constricting as to make the project impracticable), and this can become a daunting task. For this reason, we envision the development of a series of BMPs that may need to be combined in varying combination to provide the appropriate results. Due to this potential we anticipate that many times it will be necessary to provide a series of BMPs with a discussion of when each is appropriate. Some may find it valuable to develop dichotomous keys that walk project proponents through the process of deciding which combination of BMPs is appropriate for their proposed activity. Others may find it useful to identify certain types of effects and the appropriate BMPs for addressing each.

These BMPs will contain descriptions of what they are intended to accomplish from an ecological standpoint, the consequences of not implementing them, and suggestions for achieving similar ecological results in the event that they cannot be implemented. Ultimately, the goal of this process is to provide project proponents with the information needed to complete their own informal cost-benefit analyses that will allow them to make educated decisions regarding the design of their projects. This can be especially effective when utilized early in project design phases when flexibility exists to make minor modifications with the minimum of disruption to planned activities and can also be helpful for an action agency's NEPA process.

The system will provide project proponents with Service contacts so they will know who to contact for consultation-related information. Early coordination between the action agency and the Service can often facilitate a successful consultation process.

One of the goals of this system is to decrease the amount of time and effort project proponents have to expend to obtain ecological information that will assist them in evaluating the potential for their proposed projects to affect listed resources and to obtain guidance on steps that can be taken to reduce or eliminate these effects. Ultimately this can lead to better designed projects that will require less time and effort to complete section 7(a)(2) consultation, or that will potentially reduce or eliminate the need for consultation all together. Eventually, the Service would like to utilize the BMPs to complete a series of programmatic consultations that will allow any project using them to be appended to them so the section 7 consultation process can be completed in just a few days or, at times, within hours.

Finally, the system will communicate with the appropriate Service biologists who will be able to review any information provided and notify project proponents of any unusual circumstances that they are aware of that the system has not identified. This will hopefully reduce the number of times project proponents are surprised by the needs of section 7(a)(2) consultation; streamlining consultation and planning processes.